

THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSES

BY ELEANOR J. STEBNER

Funded by SSHRC (Grant No: 435-2012-1276), the NHIMV project explores the contributions of neighbourhood houses to local communities. Neighbourhood houses have a long history of operation in Vancouver, dating back to 1938. They began as part of the Settlement House Movement made famous in North America by Jane Addams and her work at Hull House. While time and distance have created differences to that early model, the houses remain neighbourhood-based, locally governed, multi-service, community development oriented organizations. Visit www.nhvproject.ca for more information.

The fourteen neighbourhood houses (NHs) in the municipalities of Vancouver, North Vancouver, Burnaby, and Surrey, though different in size and each uniquely embodying its particular community, offer programs and services for people of all ages, races, and interests. They are grounded in the conviction of individual and community empowerment through social interactions, volunteer service, mutual support, and learning from one another. As Helen Hart, an early 20th century leader of the NH movement in both Canada and the United States, said, such houses are not charity: "it is not a case of one set of people giving something that another set receives, it is a pooling by all of us of the best we know how to share. It is a living and sharing of life."

Overview

NHs in Metro-Vancouver date to the 1938 opening of **Alexandra NH** in the neighbourhood of Kitsilano. It was formed out of the resources of a women's and children's hospital founded in 1891 and an orphanage that opened in 1892, which was incorporated as the Alexandra Non-Sectarian Children's Home in 1894. NHs are thereby linked to the earliest of social organizations founded following the passage of the provincial 1891 Benevolent Societies Act, which allowed for the formation of societies, clubs, and other organizations to unite in activities seeking the common good.

Metro-Vancouver's NHs are part of an international movement that began in East London (England) with the opening of Toynbee Hall in 1884. They were then called *settlement houses* because early leaders lived in the houses, i.e., they settled in them. Hundreds of houses were quickly founded in various locations in Europe, North America, Australia, Asia, and elsewhere. They are still being founded today in communities of economic and social deprivation. The newest NHs in Metro-Vancouver were founded in 2004 (**Surrey**) and 2005 (**Downtown East Side**).

The first NH in the United States opened in 1886 in New York City, and the first in Canada opened in 1899 in Toronto. NHs provided an early and significant professional outlet for women to work and live independently. Indeed, women provided invaluable leadership although they are often overlooked

in part because of scarce historical records on many of them. The profession of social work and the academic discipline of applied sociology largely emerged from this movement.

Most of Canada's early NHs were started before World War I in places like Toronto, Montreal, and Winnipeg, when they were experiencing industrialization and urban growth. Most of Vancouver's NHs, however, were opened post World War II when it was experiencing a huge population influx, racial tensions, and urban development. These houses were often initiated by citizen action groups/associations that organized to address the needs of their communities in face of larger political and economic forces.

While NHs in other places were often founded by particular religious institutions or

universities and colleges, this was not so in Metro-Vancouver. Rather, these houses were intentionally nonsectarian. And neither the University of British Columbia (UBC) nor later, Simon Fraser University, officially sponsored or endorsed any of the NHs although UBC social work students did their placements in them and NH staff acted as their field supervisors.

Despite the British colonial ties of Vancouver, its leaders were more influenced by the ideas and experiences of American NH leaders than by British ones. They especially admired Jane Addams and Graham Taylor, two influential Chicago-based leaders, while Helen Hall and Paul Kellogg of New York City advised them on how to initially form Alexandra NH. Furthermore, most of the early NH leaders in Vancouver came from Eastern Canada.

While not as politically active as NHs in other locales, NHs here supported the 1949 UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, the 1968 Brief to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, and the efforts in the 1960s to eliminate poverty; they agreed with Pierre Burton's adage that poverty exists because society would rather invest in things than in people. In the 1980s NHs bussed their people to the annual Marches for Peace to oppose the escalating nuclear arms race.

Miscellany

Some fascinating people have been involved in Metro-Vancouver's NHs over the years including BC's first woman judge, Helen Gregory MacGill; singer Juliette, a CBC celebrity in the 1950s and 1960s; legendary tap dancer Jeni LeGon, who taught generations of students in Vancouver; journalist Denny Boyd, a popular Vancouver Sun reporter; and politician Grace MacInnis who held terms in both the provincial legislature and the federal parliament.

In 1950 Harry M. Morrow, executive director of Alexandra NH, organized a conference which was to include NH people from the American Northwest, and reserved rooms and conference space at the Georgia Hotel. He cancelled as soon as he learned that it would

not accept African American guests. The conference was held instead at the Devonshire Hotel and, by all accounts, it was a success.

What is now called the Association of NHs BC was formed in 1966 and hired its first executive director. Its purpose was to enable NHs to present a unified budget regarding the various services and needs that exist throughout the metro area, publicize the importance of NHs in the lives of thousands of people and their contributions to civic wellbeing, and improve salaries and training for NH staff. Half of Metro-Vancouver's NHs currently belong to the association.

During May and June of 1976 Vancouver welcomed hundreds of visitors to participate in the 1st UN Habitat Conference on Human Settlements, the Habitat Forum, and the International Federation of Settlements (IFS) conference, the latter organized by Metro-Vancouver NHs. The IFS conference participants applauded the goal of the UN conference and the forum to include "local people in planning for a better life, a better nation, a better world," which is exactly what NHs have always aimed to do.

A huge loss occurred when Marpole Place NH closed in 2014 because of insufficient funding. Although the City of Vancouver is looking for a non-profit operator to deliver needed social programs in the community and will donate the building rent free for ten years, the future agency needs to secure the funding for its proposed programs and staff; it may or may not be a NH. Financial challenges have existed throughout the almost 80-year history of NHs in Metro-Vancouver and will likely continue.

NH Week is celebrated annually in early May by the four municipalities of Metro-Vancouver that are lucky to have NHs. It is a way to honour their contributions to building and sustaining relationships of support and solidarity between people and in their communities. NH Week occurs at the same time in many places throughout the world and seems to always involve food, a vital part of the "living and sharing of life" itself.